

# SOCIAL NETWORKING FRAMEWORK FOR UNIVERSITIES IN SAUDI ARABIA

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## ABSTRACT

The interactive capacities of social networking instruments have unleashed a number of possibilities for enhancing teaching and learning in the higher education sector and many universities are engaged in harnessing the capabilities of these tools. While much valuable research has been conducted on this theme, scholarship has tended to be oriented towards academic practices and sample student populations derived from mainstream societies and countries; little research has been conducted into social networking uptake in higher education sectors in peripheral geo-cultural regions. This research aims to focus on Saudi Arabia in order to develop and assess a social networking framework for the use by Saudi Arabian universities. The main research outcome will be a social networking framework for higher education in Saudi Arabia which can be used by Government departments, funding bodies, university management, administrators and technical support departments for the benefit of teaching staff and learners.

## KEYWORDS

Social Network, Web 2.0, Saudi Arabia, Higher Education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research describes and evaluates a multitude of trials and projects world-wide as providers strive for relevance in the eyes of their digitally conversant target market by incorporating social networking sites as pedagogical instruments (Conole et al. 2004; Jonnavithula & Tretiakov 2012; Tella, Alias & Ithnin 2009). While the current research is prolific, it is limited in two crucial areas: firstly, there is little extant research on systematic, top-down, wider scale usage of social networking as a tool within university pedagogies. Furthermore, most of the current literature references universities, students and pedagogical practices which derive from a “Western” mainstream and do not delve into what social networking might offer – and how it should be contextualized for - different teaching and learning cultures. Accordingly, this research aims to identify the factors which must be taken into account when developing a Social Networking Framework for higher education in Saudi Arabia.

## 2. BACKGROUND

This research focuses on instruments that are considered to be Web 2.0 technology such as wikis, blogs and media sharing sites under the umbrella term social networking. Foremost among Web 2.0 tools are social networking applications such as Facebook and Twitter. While they differ in terms of functionality, purpose and uses, such Web 2.0 or social networking tools are united by their interactive and user-centric capabilities.

### 2.1 Web 2.0 Tools in Higher Education

Higher education is considered a natural arena for the implementation of social networking technologies for two reasons: firstly, the uptake of social networking by “Digital Natives” (Prensky 2005), and secondly, the suitability of interactive technologies to the ends of higher education where creating, sharing and

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disseminating ideas in academic communities is of primary importance. Indeed, in recent times, universities and other higher education providers – at the level of individual practitioners or faculty-wide – have actively sought to deploy the functionalities of collaborative digital technologies in their teaching and learning methodologies and a nascent body of research has emerged. This research has focused on the ways in which emergent social networking technologies have the potential to reconfigure pedagogical practices, course delivery techniques and teacher-learner relationships in institutions of higher learning. Most of these pilot studies examine the pedagogical usages of Facebook, Twitter, wikis, blogs and other Web 2.0 applications. While not uniformly in support of social networking in higher education, most of this research heralds the benefits of technologically enhanced teaching and learning, particularly the ability of these platforms to provide the advantages of ubiquity, synchronicity and connectivity. These innate characteristics of social networking technologies are seen to support vital academic functions such as knowledge construction, sharing of ideas and resources and critical thinking (Acquisti & Gross 2006; Alkindi & Alhashmi 2012; Caruso & Salaway 2007; Chu & Meulemans 2008; Eberhardt 2007; Evans & Kilinc 2013; Godwin-Jones 2008; Greenhow & Robelia 2009; Hamid, Chang & Kurnia 2009; Muñoz & Towner 2011). Risks and pitfalls identified in these studies include issues of privacy, security and trust, lack of technological expertise in some user groups, time wasting, laziness and distractibility as well as reduced depth of thought and academic achievement (Boogart & Robert 2006; Çardak 2013; Grabmeier 2009; Khan 2009; Mesch 2009; Weiss 2013; Wilson 2009).

## **2.2 Web 2.0 Tools in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia occupies an ironic position in relation to social networking in that the country is both highly traditional and permeated by Islamic precepts and practices, yet, especially in the case of its younger demographic, enthused about technological innovation. Recent reports suggest that there are more than 13 million users of digital applications in Saudi Arabia, with 51% of the population active on Twitter and 42% on Facebook (NourElDineDaaboul 2013). In regard to its national agenda of modernisation, Saudi Arabia is currently in the 9<sup>th</sup> phase of a series of five-year reform plans (2010 – 2014) and has dedicated considerable resources to the implementation of ICT-based teaching and learning in order to achieve objectives related to quality in its educational sector. However, information and communications technology initiatives in Saudi Arabia have been largely limited to more traditional forms of electronic engagement, such as delivery of online study materials and lectures, rather than the incorporation of more cutting-edge web technologies. Little published research is available to support enquiry into how Saudi college students perceive and make use of social networking or to what extent faculties incorporate social networking applications into their course delivery and pedagogical practices (Chaurasia, Asma & Ahmed 2011, p. 312). Of the handful of studies that do exist, many focus on “e-learning” or distance learning technologies and classic LMS tools as opposed to more contemporary collaborative Web 2.0 instruments (Al-Khalifa & Garcia 2013; Al-Otaibi 2011; Al-Saggaf 2004; Al Saif 2005; Alenezi, Abdulkarim & Veloo 2010; Almalki 2011). Other studies focus only on barriers to social networking in Saudi Arabia, including Internet access issues, gender equity, trust and privacy concerns, lack of Arabic language interfaces and user support documents for technological platforms and the predominance of in person and rote-learning styles (Al-Khalifa & Garcia 2013; Aljasir, Woodcock & Harrison 2012; Almalki 2011; Binsahl & Chang 2012; Chaurasia, Asma & Ahmed 2011; Sultan et al. 2012).

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

This study draws on both interpretative and “mixed” approaches: in so doing, the research in its first phase utilises focus groups to draw on the perspectives of stakeholders within the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of what might constitute a suitable framework for incorporating social networking into the university curriculum. Furthermore, the research takes a mixed mode approach whereby the integration of quantitative methods adds to the depth and rigour of the subject under scrutiny. In this case, an online survey will be used and its results analysed according to Factor Analysis so as to achieve a more sophisticated and rigorous picture of what might constitute a successful set of factors for a framework for social networking within the context under investigation. Finally, this research aims to address and answer the following research question: What are the factors that must be considered for developing a social networking framework for higher education in Saudi Arabia?

## 4. RESEARCH OUTCOME

The proposed framework which has been developed for this research based on the literature review will then be subject to further examination and assessment through stakeholder feedback comprises a set of core factors which are believed to be crucial to the success of social networking as a pedagogical tool in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, it is suggested that the framework must contain a set of practical guidelines and suggestions, including visual representations. Secondly, a robust framework must include core functionalities which enable collaborative and interactive transactions between users within a design specification which caters for navigability, ease of use and optimal linkage mechanisms between “functional” spaces such as learner and teacher “spaces”. Another core factor is a technological infrastructure that guarantees continuity and reliability of usage as well as high levels of support for end users. Finally, integral to the framework is the notion of a sound pedagogical framework in which user roles, teaching and learning paradigms and teaching and learning activities are well framed and understood. Surrounding these core factors, it is proposed that the framework needs to be adjusted to account for variables such as the socio-cultural context and how this defines social and gendered identity, teacher-learner roles as well as understandings about learning and knowledge construction. Allied to this, the framework needs to control for national factors such as investment in education as well as governmental stance on open source, web-based technologies, and organisational factors which may include the organisational culture of individual universities, flexibility of senior management and the way in which social networking may “fit” organisational objectives. In sum, the perspective of all stakeholders needs to inform the design and development of the framework which is the purpose of this research. This framework might prove to be a mapping guide to government departments, funding bodies, university management, administration and technical support teams involved in any future endeavour to integrate social networking within the higher sector in Saudi Arabia. By extension, students and teaching personnel would be advantaged by the inclusion of such technologies due to their potential to support key higher education teaching and learning tasks. Furthermore, the framework lends itself to application to other contexts in that it comprises a set of core factors as well as a set of surrounding, influential factors. This second set of factors can be analysed in the context of other socio-cultural, national and economic variables which then affect how core items are mobilised, altered, omitted or replaced in view of the surrounding influences for the country under consideration. In all, the study aims to identify the factors which will act as a blueprint for successful usage as Saudi Arabia consolidates itself economically, socially and educationally and aims towards higher standards of scholarship and innovation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research is in the early stages of identifying which factors might constitute a framework for the successful implementation of social networking into universities in Saudi Arabia. Thus far, the research has pinpointed a number of key critical points, derived from global literature on the role social networking can play in the pedagogical pursuits of higher education, and created an encompassing framework. Further investigation will now take place to refine the model so that Saudi Arabia is poised to benefit from a social networking system that foregrounds benefits and controls for risks.

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